

WA's maiden outright win

PERTH, Australia, Jan 17: Western Australia finally broke through here Monday to register their first outright win of the Sheffield Shield season when they beat South Australia by three wickets at the WACA Ground, reports AFP.

Chasing a target of 256 on the final day of the four-day match, Western Australia made 256 for seven, with 21 overs to spare.

The win was built around a fourth-wicket partnership of 87 by captain Justin Langer (77) and Marcus North (60).

Langer's aggressive knock followed his 120 in the first innings -- his fourth first-class century of the season.

North, 20, was playing in only his second Shield match.

Western Australia's win is not enough to give them a realistic chance of qualifying for the final of the competition they have won for the past two summers.

South Australia still have reasonable prospects of making the final.

ACA to name dream team today

SYDNEY, Jan 17: More than 100 Australian Test cricketers will gather for lunch here on Tuesday to hear whether they have made their nation's 20th century dream team, reports AFP.

The function, being organised by the Australian Cricketers' Association (ACA), brings together players like Arthur Morris of the 1948 Invincibles team and current star Shane Warne.

A notable absentee will be 91-year-old Donald Bradman, widely regarded as Australia's greatest cricketer, who shuns public appearances and lives a reclusive life in Adelaide.

The dream team will be picked by a 20-member panel of players and journalists drawn from Australia and around the world.

The panel may not need to pick 11 players -- just the 10 to join Bradman, whose astonishing Test average of 99.94 makes him an automatic selection.

The panel has been asked to consider the balance of the team, a player's impact on his times and his ability to single-handedly influence results.

One cricket writer speculated on the likely team:

Bill Ponsford, Arthur Morris, Don Bradman (captain), Greg Chappell, Steve Waugh, Keith Miller, Rodney Marsh (wicketkeeper), Ray Lindwall, Shane Warne, Dennis Lillee, Bill O'Reilly, Neil Harvey (12th man).

That, however, excludes such outstanding players as Victor Trumper, Bob Simpson, Stan McCabe, Allan Border, Alan Davidson, Don Tallon and Jeff Thomson.

"Maybe they could form the nucleus of a second eleven," the writer said.

"And maybe that second eleven could beat the first eleven. You wouldn't bet against it," he said.

Botham jr to try rugby with Wales

LONDON, Jan 17: England cricket legend Ian Botham's son Liam is to be picked for the Welsh rugby union training squad, coach Graham Henry said Monday, reports AFP.

The Cardiff wing is English but would qualify to play for Wales in November, and that would be the first step on the road to Botham donning the red jersey.

Botham, 22, would prefer to play for England, but Wales coach Graham Henry hopes the fact he has so far been ignored by Clive Woodward will work in their favour.

Henry names his Six Nations training squad Tuesday and has confirmed Botham will be among the 70-plus players.

He told BBC Breakfast News: "We are going to include him if he wants in the trials in two weeks' time."

"Playing in a trial does not stop him playing for anyone else. It is only once you have played for the A team or the full team you cannot switch."

England coach Woodward insists he is keeping an eye on Botham's progress -- and although the winger would prefer to play for the country of his birth he is refusing to rule anything out.

"I am still English, so that's who I want to play for -- but we will have to see what happens," Botham said.



Iranian defender Mehdi Hadheminasab is about to intercept Cobi Jones of the United States during their international friendly match at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena on January 16. —AFP photo

No one is a loser

PASADENA, California, Jan 17: The United States and Iran played to a 1-1 draw here Sunday in the much anticipated friendly that highlighted the Islamic Republic football team's three-match US tour.

More than 49,000 fans turned out at the Rose Bowl, most of them vocal supporters of Iran who turned the stands into a sea of red, white and green.

Mehdi Mahdavi, of Hamburg in the Bundesliga, opened the scoring in the seventh minute, angling a shot past US keeper Brad Friedel off a pass from Khodadad Azizi, who was released by German club Cologne in December.

The United States didn't get the equalizer until the 48th, when Cobi Jones's cross found midfielder Chris Armas, who fired past Iranian keeper Hadi Tabatabaei.

"I'm not a goal scorer, but I'll take any chance I get," said Armas, who had a chance to put the hosts ahead in the 69th minute when he was again fed by Jones but fired wide.

"I'd give anything I could to get that second chance back," Armas said. "I did the best I could with it."

The United States failed to fully avenge their 2-1 defeat by Iran in the 1998 World Cup. But coach Bruce Arena, who took over after Steve Sampson's departure in the wake of the dismal showing in France, professed himself satisfied.

"We managed to adjust," said Arena, whose team were bedev-

iled early on by Azizi, himself newly returned to the Iranian fold after not being selected for the national team in more than a year.

"I prefer not to talk about my past," Azizi said when asked about his time in the international wilderness. "I was playing in Germany and had some injuries. If you are not playing it is difficult for a coach to select you."

Eventually, the United States were able to rein in both Azizi and star striker Ali Daei.

"In the first 20 minutes of the game, Azizi and Daei were able to withdraw into the mid-field and get some space and create some havoc," Arena said.

"We released the center backs on those two in the second half, and it made it harder for them to get to balls."

He also noted Jones' second-minute attempt that bounced off the left post.

"I would have been happy to get an early goal," Arena said. "I would have been happy to get a second goal as well."

Comparing the match to the World Cup clash, Arena noted that Iran's team was virtually the same, while the United States had changed dramatically.

"The Iranian team is much closer to the team that had in the World Cup," Arena said. "The core of players is still there, Daei, Azizi. Our team has been rebuilt since the World Cup."

Only four veterans of France 98 were on the US squad: Jones, captain Claudio Reyna, Frankie Hejduk and Brian McBride -- who scored the only US goal in

that defeat.

Most of the attention focused on the match concerned the political ramifications. It was the Iranian football team's first trip to the United States since the rupture of diplomatic relations over the taking of US hostages in Tehran in 1979.

"We were just excited about playing at the start of the year," Arena said of his side's first match of 2000.

"That the Iranian team beat us in the World Cup made it an interesting match-up, but we didn't concern ourselves with politics."

Iranian coach Mansour Pour-Heidari also steered clear of the diplomatic quagmire.

"I think it was an excellent game for us and the fans who showed up," said Pour-Heidari, adding that a similar side would contest the upcoming Asian Cup. "I was very happy with the technical side. We played very direct in the first half, in the second half, of course we are always playing to win, but the further the game goes at 1-1, we also know we must protect the draw."

Iran finished its three-match tour with one defeat, one victory and the draw. They lost 2-1 to Mexico in Oakland, California, last Sunday, then defeated Ecuador 2-1 at the Los Angeles Coliseum on Wednesday.

Pour-Heidari said he would welcome another chance to take on the United States.

"I can't say yes or no," he said of the chance of a return match. "But we would like to, because then we can beat them better the next time."

Almost a home match

PASADENA, California, Jan 17: The United States and Iran fought each other to a 1-1 tie here Sunday, but the Iranians easily prevailed in the battle for fan support, reports AFP.

At least 85 percent of the Rose Bowl crowd of more than 49,000 were Iranian Americans backing the visitors.

They draped themselves in Iranian flags, painted their faces in the flag's colours of red, white and green, tooted plastic horns and shouted themselves hoarse, as the two teams traded scoring chances across the damp grass.

The make-up of the crowd for this afternoon match was no accident: organizers sited the match here in order to take advantage of this area's 700,000-strong, soccer-mad Iranian American community.

And at times Sunday it seemed as if every Iranian American in the area had shown up to cheer the Iranian National Team.

They brandished Iranian flags -- both the pre-revolutionary version with the royal lion in the center, and the current one with "Islamic Republic of Iran" written in Farsi.

The Rose Bowl erupted when Iranian midfielder Mehdi Mahdavi notched the first goal in the seventh minute. Shouts of "Iran! Iran!" rang through the stadium.

Sunday's match -- televised live on ESPN in the United States and on Iranian television -- was the first between the two countries to be played on US soil.

Politics overshadowed the last time the two sides met -- in the 1998 World Cup in France, when Iran beat the United States 2-1.

This time, Iran was here for a series of "friendly" matches. They lost 2-1 to Mexico in Oakland on January 9, and defeated Ecuador 2-1 here last Wednesday.

US fans Stacie Toon and Andrew Roeder felt a little outnumbered in the pro-Iranian, drum-pounding, flag-waving party outside the stadium before the game.

"There was more tension before the last one (in France)," said Roeder, 26.

"Don't worry," joked Mustafa Nejadi, a 22-year-old political science student at the University of California. "There won't be any problems as long as Iran wins."

It was a tie, and there were no incidents among the good-natured crowd.

It appeared that very many of the Iranian Americans in the crowd would call themselves opponents of the current government in Tehran. Many have been here for some two decades, fleeing the Shah's rule, or the Islamic revolution of 1979, or even the Iran-Iraq War which followed.

Outside the stadium, Farzad Farhani distributed posters with the photo of a recent bearded student protester in Iran -- a picture that appeared on the front cover of the June issue of the London-based Economist magazine.

"He was sentenced to die for the only reason that his picture appeared on the cover of the Economist," claimed Farhani, 41.

It was a slight exaggeration. The Economist reported last November that the demonstrator pictured, student Ahmed Batebi, had been among a group of up to ten students sentenced for their involvement in last summer's protests. He was sentenced to ten years imprisonment in October.

But Farhani conceded that most Iranian Americans had come with their families to enjoy a game of soccer.

"I don't believe it's a political game today, but because there are so many Iranians here, we are taking advantage," he said.

Some US fans said they were disappointed at the lack of support for the home side. "I guess the (Iranian American) fans have a lot more pride," said high school student Jose Per-

domo, 17, draped in the stars and stripes. "But we've got as much energy as all these Iranian fans!"

Stephanie Viars, 17, said she was "totally" disappointed in the lack of fan support for the United States side. "They should support our team," said Viars, who plays for her high school.

But US players said they weren't bothered by that, or by still tense relations between Washington and Tehran.

"We just knew it was the first game of the year for us," midfielder Chris Armas, who scored the US equalizer in the 74th minute, said after the game.

"It was a good game, a good atmosphere," Armas said. "We just approached it like any other game."

The only other top-level sporting exchanges between the two countries since 1979 have been wrestling competitions.

The United States and Iran are finally moving slowly toward normalizing relations. But Washington still maintains an economic embargo, and accuses Iran of supporting international terrorism.

Another fan, Abtin Yousefi, 30, left Iran 10 years ago. He and his wife flew across the country from Germantown, Maryland for Sunday's match.

Yousefi doesn't think the game will affect US-Iran relations one way or another, but added, "It's a good start."

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Premiership Newcastle abase Southampton

LONDON, Jan 17: Newcastle United's impressive home form continued on Sunday after they trounced Southampton 5-0 at St James's Park to climb three places in the English Premiership to 14th and clear of the relegation zone, reports AFP.

Bobby Robson's side were two up after four minutes with Scottish international striker Duncan Ferguson scoring both within 78 seconds, a close-range header after Alan Shearer's own header came back off the bar and a low drive from 18 yards.

Peruvian international Nolberto Solano added a third on 17 minutes after playing a delightful one-two with Shearer on the edge of the area before slipping the ball past Paul Jones.

Gary Monk replaced Luis Boa Morte with 23 minutes gone as Southampton attempted to shore up the defence and with one of their rare attacks Stuart Ripley's volley was superbly saved by United keeper Steve Harper.

Richard Dryden scored an own goal on the half hour for United's fourth when Kieron Dyer's cross ricocheted off his shin and into the net and the home side could even afford the luxury of a missed penalty by Shearer who rattled the crossbar.

Southampton were fortunate to limit United to only four goals in the first period as the hosts also hit the woodwork four times in a one-sided contest.

Sheffield Wednesday lost 8-0 at Newcastle earlier this season and all the signs were there that Southampton could be on the receiving end of a similar scoreline as the teams came out for the second half.

But Southampton stepped up a gear to salvage some pride and managed to keep the hosts at bay until seven minutes from time when Nikolaos Dabizas's deflected shot flew past Jones for the fifth goal.

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Primera Liga

Barca, Zaragoza miss chance

MADRID, Jan 17: Barcelona and Real Zaragoza's 0-0 draw in Sunday's late game let leaders Deportivo La Coruna, who fell 2-1 at Alaves off the hook, reports AFP.

Deportivo, who have only garnered one point in their last four matches, have led for the last nine weeks and the way was set for either Zaragoza or Barcelona to claw back some ground -- Zaragoza would even have gone into top spot had they won.

As it is, Deportivo leads by two points from Zaragoza and three from Barcelona as the team sighed a collective sigh of relief in their attempt to win the league title for the first time.

Deportivo fell to an 87th minute winner by Joyce Moreno after Deportivo's Dutchman Roy Makaay had equalized the opener of Julio Salinas.

Deportivo played conserva-

tively, and into the hands of Alaves, who opened the scoring through 37-year-old Salinas from the spot.

Playing without usual strikers Pauleta and Turu Flores, not selected by coach Javier Irarreta, Deportivo managed to pull a goal back five minutes after the break through Makaay before Moreno's 87th minute winner.

Dani skied an early chance for Barcelona from eight metres after captain Luis Figó's cross from the right was headed back by Rivaldo at the far post.

Then, at the other end, Ander Carrizosa miscued a first time left-foot shot as he raced into the box at full speed.

Chances were at a premium for either side though Zaragoza did have a chance with a Savo Milosevic glancing header which failed to find the net.

Rivaldo also had a great chance from a Boudewijn Zenden cross from the left but his shot just went wide of the left hand post.

Celta Vigo meanwhile re-found their winning touch with

a 5-3 victory over Real Oviedo, the first eight-goal match in Spain this season.

Argentina's 21-year-old Mario Hector Turdo hit a hat-trick, and Russia's Alexander Mostovo, who returned to action after a year in jail, added another piece.

Racing Santander's Salva hit his 21st goal of the season from the penalty spot in injury time at the end of the match to earn a 1-1 draw at home to Valencia, whose Gaizka Mendietia had also scored from the spot in the 34th minute.

Salva, the target of top Italian clubs, beat Spain's international keeper Santiago Canizares, who returned to action after four months out injured.

Jose-Felix Guerrero equalized Salva by scoring in the dying seconds to earn a 1-1 draw at basement club Seville.

Real Valladolid continued their unbeaten series, now up to seven matches, following their 2-0 victory over Numancia.

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